Getting back in the game

All you need to knock off the rust is a plan

By Wally Miller
Photography by Mike Fizer

Everyone has heard about the incident a couple of months ago when a Cessna 150 entered restricted airspace around Washington D.C. and came within two miles of the White House before turning away.

Without knowing the facts, I wondered if this was a case of a pilot getting "rusty." We still don't know the full story, and we may never know.

But for now, what can we learn from the episode?

It's a much more complex world

Regardless of your pilot certificate and any ratings, there is *much* more to know now than there was when you got it. Airspace has become more complex. It's more and more time-consuming than ever to keep up to date on information, not to mention the basic stick-and-rudder proficiency we all need to maintain. *Not* keeping up with changes or maintaining proficiency can cause big problems nowadays. How do you know if you're getting rusty? What will it take for you to get back in the game?

That strange feeling

Have you ever felt more than just a little uneasy in the cockpit? Perhaps it's been a while since you've flown a particular make, model, or type of airplane, or flown at night, or on a low IFR day if you are instrument-rated. I know I have. It's not a good feeling.

Have you ever been hesitant about certain procedures or felt you had insufficient information to do something you needed to do during a flight? Maybe you could not locate a particular switch as quickly as you'd like, or you couldn't get the avionics to display some information you wanted to see. Perhaps you hung up the phone after talking to Flight Service and remembered 10 more questions you should have asked.

If any of this has ever happened to you, maybe rust is beginning to form.

The choices are pretty simple: Commit to doing something about it; ignore the symptoms and keep limping along at your peril; or quit flying.

After all the time and money you've put into learning to fly, I hope you'll rule out the last option. With a simple plan, getting back up to speed is easy--and there's a lot of help out there.

How frequently do you need to fly in order to feel confident? Depending on what's going on in your life, it might not take much to begin to lose that edge. Even when you comply with all the currency requirements imposed by the federal aviation regulations and your flight school or FBO, it's easy to get rusty. Just a few weeks away from the airplane can cause some pilots to go "non-current" even when they are in full compliance with all the regulatory requirements.

'Legal' vs. 'safe'

Federal Aviation Regulation 61.56 says that to fly alone you are only *required* to have a flight review--as little as one flight with a certificated flight instructor--every 24 months.

Flying with passengers is something else. In addition to the flight review, FAR 61.57 prescribes a minimum of three takeoffs and three landings *within the previous 90 days* in the same category, class, and--if required--type of aircraft in which you're going to haul your passengers in. For pilot-in-command currency for tailwheel aircraft and night flight, the landings have to be to a full stop.

For pilots with instrument ratings, FAR 61.67 specifies that to legally fly in instrument meteorological conditions, within the previous six months you must have had an instrument proficiency check, or you must have flown--and *logged*--six actual or simulated IMC approaches (with a qualified safety observer aboard, if simulated), intercepted and tracked navaid courses, and practiced holding procedures--otherwise you can't legally fly instruments. (See "Legal Briefing: Instrument Currency," p. 61.)

I can't stay proficient--much less safe--flying those minimums. That's why I emphasize that regulatory compliance only keeps us legal, not necessarily safe or proficient.

We've got to go *beyond* legal to fly safely.

One of the best pilots I know usually flies with me about every six months, just to stay up to speed on new developments. Although he is an active, current pilot who stays in the books and flies regularly in his own airplane, he wants another opinion--and wants to keep learning. If you are seeing signs of rust, make up your mind to do something about it. First, make a commitment and assess the costs of doing that in terms of your time and money. Budget both and plan your comeback. Getting back up to speed with your flying requires a plan.

Step one in your plan might be to talk with a flight instructor you trust. If you can't find a good instructor right away, ask around. When you find a good match, get into the air.

Ask your instructor for an appraisal of your skills. Your comeback will probably require more headwork than stick and rudder. You've got to get back into the books and get up to speed with the headwork first. If you know it, you can make it happen. You just have to study.

If you think you either don't have or can't afford the time required to regularly keep up to date on the changes in regulations, procedures, and airspace that regularly occur, you're going to stay rusty. That's another good reason to get a good flight instructor. CFIs stay current on all those

changes. They are *required* by FAR Part 61 to get "formally" up to date every two years by renewing their flight instructor certificates.

If you feel just a little rusty--or even not rusty at all--flying periodically with a CFI is a great investment. I stay fairly current, but I also fly several different airplanes, so I don't want to mix up procedures--and I train to avoid that. Even though I fly regularly with students, my last flight with another CFI was only about a month ago. I wanted to make sure I was *really* current in a particular make and model, since I hadn't flown it for more than six months. The flight school at which I most often fly requires that level of currency.

Use the PTS as a guide

If you're starting on a rehabilitation program, use the practical test standards (PTS) for the certificate(s) you now hold to assess how you stack up against what the FAA thinks you should be able to do and what you should know.

Start by thumbing through the Areas of Operation in the PTS. Go through the various tasks under each of those areas and ask yourself whether you really understand that item. Just knowing does a lot for confidence.

If you're a private pilot, review your preflight preparation: checking out the airplane, obtaining and analyzing weather, computing flight plans and aircraft performance, understanding the airspace you'll be flying through, thinking about how to use various airplane systems, and managing your cockpit--as well as outside assets--during the flight.

Mentally review your takeoffs and landings under varying conditions. Think about *how* you operate the airplane. Have you ever been distracted in the cockpit? Where are the likely spots where you could possibly stall the aircraft and what can you do to prevent that possibility from occurring? Do you remember how to safely recover? Reducing angle of attack is all it takes.

While this may sound pretty basic, just knowing is important. Work through the areas that concern you or your instructor and don't hesitate to jump back into the books.

Studying so you have the knowledge is a powerful tool. Being confident about *what* to do when, and *how* to do it, brings strength to otherwise uncertain operations and situations. Simply knowing and following standard procedures has been proven to prevent accidents.

The importance of judgment

Knowing also vastly improves judgment. It has been identified as a critical factor in avoiding accidents. And a great part of flying is having and using sound judgment.

Why is judgment important? We must be able to answer the question, "Under what circumstances will I go around?" Think about that question.

Let's ask that question a little differently: What, specifically, will you *do* the next time you go around? Do you have a *simple* procedure that will work for you *every* time in mind *right now*? If not, teach yourself one! Develop confidence that you've thought about exactly what you're going to do, decided what conditions or circumstances will prompt you make that decision, and don't be afraid to do it. (See "Going, Going, Go Around," p. 24.)

If you have anticipated problems and know how you will address them if they occur, you'll avoid trouble. If you're a new private pilot and you know how to make a 180-degree turn solely by reference to instruments, make the decision to employ that skill when the time comes--and should it become necessary, *do it*--promptly. If you do, you'll never fly into instrument meteorological conditions and lose control of the airplane. That's because you know ahead of time exactly what you're going to do.

Fly as much as you can afford, but have a purpose when you do. During those times when you can't get as much flight time as you'd like, mentally brush up on systems, checklists, air traffic control procedures and communications, and specific flight maneuvers. This will help you to keep your head in the game.

Practice makes perfect

Going back to school--self-study, thought, and getting up to date with the new rules and procedures if necessary--is a necessary prelude to spending your money in the cockpit.

Once you've scheduled some time in the air, don't try to do anything in the airplane that you haven't thought through on the ground. Let your instructor help. Talk about the procedures and techniques most appropriate to regaining your proficiency, *then* go out to the airplane and execute them.

You might even go looking for a crosswind. If you can't find one right away, it helps to have thought of a few tips the next time that crosswind finds you. Review what the pilot's operating handbook says about landing in strong crosswinds; most will recommend partial or no flaps. Review proper control positions: on the ground; starting the takeoff roll; and after landing; review will help improve your control on the ground in stronger winds. Adding half of the gust value to final approach airspeed will help controllability. Keep a crosswind component chart handy when flying in strong winds.

If there's any doubt in your mind about your ability to handle a situation, avoid it. If the crosswind component makes you uncomfortable, go to an airport with a runway aligned into the wind. Then, at your earliest opportunity, schedule some crosswind practice with an instructor. Whenever you think you might be getting a little rusty, do something about it. You can then face any reasonable situation again with the confidence that you have up-to-date knowledge and the ability to employ it. You also will have reacquired the good judgment to stay on the ground when you know you shouldn't be flying.

Welcome back! You're already halfway there when you make the decision to get back in the game.

Wally Miller is president of an aviation training, consulting, and marketing firm in Monument, Colorado. He is a Gold Seal CFI who has been instructing for more than 30 years and flying for more than 40.

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